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ABSTRACT

This Digest discusses School-to-Work (STW) programs, which are aimed at developing an integrated secondary school curriculum that facilitates students' transition from school to the workplace. It addresses school-based learning in STW programs, especially the practices that language arts teachers can use in classrooms to meet STW goals. The Digest then describes three categories of K-12 language arts learning approaches and exemplary practices: (1) practices that support interdisciplinary learning, or learning across the curriculum; (2) student-centered career exploration projects; and (3) entrepreneurial school projects. The Digest concludes that educators who are responsible for developing school curricula and learning outcomes need to remain abreast of educational reforms that will meet the demands of a more dynamic future workforce. (RS)

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School-To-Work Transition in Language Arts Classrooms: School-Based Learning Approaches and Practices

by Karen Yeok-Hwa Ngeow

School-to-Work (STW) Transition is an education initiative that brings educators, students, business, and industry together to help young people progress smoothly from their classrooms to their careers. STW programs are aimed at developing an integrated secondary school curriculum that facilitates students' transition from school to the workplace. Some benefits of the STW initiative are:

- it adds relevance to the classroom (e.g., by creating opportunities to integrate academic instruction with real-world work experience).
- it provides the students with the knowledge and experience needed to make informed career choices (e.g., by developing job readiness and good work habits such as leadership and teamwork skills).
- it improves students' performance, resulting in higher achievement levels, increased motivation, improved attendance rates, and reduced dropout rates.

School-based learning in STW programs

STW programs generally comprise three major components: (1) school-based learning, (2) work-based learning, and (3) activities to connect school-based and work-based learning. School-based learning is classroom practice that integrates high academic standards with workplace skills. Work-based learning refers to experience at job sites that allows students to develop skills and apply content knowledge in a hands-on, occupational setting. Connecting activities are aimed at providing program coordination and support for students, schools and employers in areas such as career counseling, post-secondary education, and job placements.

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The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) identifies two types of skills considered necessary for students' success in the workplace: school-based *foundations* and work-based *competencies* (Washington State Work-Based Learning Resource Center, 1997). Many STW initiatives and research grants generally emphasize developing work-based competencies. These work-based learning strategies include field trips to workplaces, classroom visits by entrepreneurs, job shadowing certain workers, and getting involved in internship and apprenticeship programs in occupational settings. However, there is comparatively little emphasis on exploring or developing strategies that would help K-12 teachers meet STW goals in their classrooms. Since most children spend more time in the school than any other environment before they enter the workforce, it is equally important to explore ways for teachers to help students develop foundation skills, which are usually described as a K-12 responsibility. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to discuss initiatives in the school-based learning component, and explore various practices that Language Arts teachers can use in classrooms to meet STW goals.

Students cannot succeed without a strong academic foundation in basic skills such as reading, writing, communication, and math. They must have a broad range of knowledge, and they must understand and be able to apply that knowledge, regardless of their career interests. Foundation skills can be divided into three components. The first component is made up of the *basic skills* of reading, writing, arithmetic/mathematics, speaking, and listening. The second component consists of *thinking skills*, which include creative thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, mental visualization, knowing how to learn, and reasoning. The third component of the SCAN skills addresses the development of *personal qualities* such as responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, and integrity (Packer & Pines, 1996).

Changes in the contexts of learning have led educators to believe that for skills acquired in schools to be applicable in the workplace, school-based learning needs to be contextualized and meaningful. Students need to develop knowledge and skills in situated settings so that they are able

CS 216 532

to see the relevance of knowledge and skill acquisition in meeting real-world needs (Resnick, 1987; Brock, 1992).

School-based learning approaches and exemplary practices in STW programs

Practices that promote school-based STW learning goals in K-12 Language Arts classrooms can be divided into three categories:

A. Practices that support interdisciplinary learning, or learning across the curriculum

Elements of an interdisciplinary curriculum include contextual approaches to instruction, applied learning, team teaching, project-based instruction, and structured work-based learning that is linked to classroom instruction. In this approach, students participate in collaborative projects that extend across various disciplines (Wonacott, 1992).

Some exemplary interdisciplinary practices in this category include:

- Organizing media publication projects, such as publishing a school newsletter or producing weekly talk or radio shows.
- Creating an Individual/Personal Career Inventory, in which students integrate activities from various disciplines to their career development.
- Learning technology skills that are necessary for the workplace, such as word processing, searching the World Wide Web for information, and appropriate use of electronic communication systems. Students can, for example, learn about formatting and document design while writing a research paper.

B. Student-centered career exploration projects

This involves providing a supportive framework for students to determine their career paths, identify related skills needed for careers of interest, and conduct self-assessment of job readiness skills (Jones, 1996). Career planning requires intensive guidance to ensure that students are equipped to make an informed decision in choosing a pathway. Initial aptitude tests, career exposure and awareness activities, labor market information, and the advice of counselors, parents, teachers, and employers can all help students choose a pathway that leads them to develop their interests, abilities, and goals.

These are some exemplary practices that students could be involved in:

- Helping to organize and attending career fairs, after which they write job-awareness reports focusing on necessary skills and abilities keyed to career paths of interest.
- Attending talks by job professionals and recruiters in order to obtain information on topics such as business communication, interviewing do's and don'ts, and job-related requirements.
- Building career portfolios that showcase products of career-related proficiencies, resumes, application letters, and testimonials of involvement in school or community-based projects.
- Developing a five-year career plan, during which they interview personnel in specific jobs, assess their job readiness, and reflect on the development of their involvement in this field.

C. Entrepreneurial school projects

In entrepreneurial projects, students apply language, math, and decision-making skills as they develop business plans and analyze strategies needed to improve business performances. Such projects include:

- Selling goods and services for a profit, marketing homemade products, or running a school store for books and stationery. To do this, students learn to research markets, analyze costs, and work out sales and publicity strategies, all of which are important information skills for workplace success.
- Volunteering and participating in community and organizational projects like fairs, conventions and conferences. This involvement provides students with organizational experience, and teaches team-building and responsible work behavior.

Teachers and curriculum planners recognize that school-based learning practices that are clearly linked to students' career achievement are successful in heightening learner motivation and improving performance. Changes in school-based learning approaches are linked to changes in attitudes, curriculum reforms, and educational outcomes. Schools cannot succeed unless teachers believe in the applicability of the skills and knowledge they impart, and unless students appreciate the purpose of education. Thus, educators who are responsible for developing school curricula and learning outcomes need to remain abreast of educational reforms that will meet the demands of a more dynamic future workforce.

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